

FAITHFUL TO THE FINISH

JOSHUA-THE ADVENTURE AND VICTORY OF FAITH

by Doug Goins

Psychoanalyst Erich Fromm wrote in *Man for Himself* , "To die is poignantly bitter, but the idea of having to die without having lived is unbearable." Joshua the son of Nun lived! His long life started in Egyptian bondage and ended in a worship service in the promised land. In between these events God used him to lead Israel in defeating the enemy and claiming the promised inheritance. With the apostle Paul, Joshua could sincerely say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith...." (2 Timothy 4:7).

Let's look at the closing verses of this tremendous book. Verses 29-33:

After these things Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, being a hundred and ten years old. And they buried him in his own inheritance at Timnath-serah, which is in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Ga'ash.

And Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work which the LORD did for Israel.

The bones of Joseph which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground which Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money; it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph.

And Eleazar the son of Aaron died; and they buried him at Gibeah, the town of Phin'ehas his son, which had been given him in the hill country of E'phraim.

This book ends with three burials, the first being Joshua's. For 110 years he had faithfully served the Lord and his people in the nation of Israel. He was buried with honor in the town that he had carved out of the wilderness in the inheritance that he claimed. There is no record of any great memorial built for him. There were ten memorial stones placed in the land during this period, and they were all memorials to God and what God did.

The second burial is Joseph's. His bones had been brought up out of bondage and carried through the wilderness, and finally he rested in the land that Jacob had purchased. He received his inheritance in the land as he was buried there. Shechem became an important city for E'phraim and Manas'seh, the two sons of Joseph. It's fitting that their wonderful ancestor could rest in the land of his fathers.

The third burial is that of Elea'zar the high priest, the son of Aaron, the former high priest of Israel. His death represented the end of an era as well.

There is a poignancy in these burials. And I confess to my surprise, I've been melancholy this week as I've come to the end of this study of the life of Joshua. I've come to like Joshua very much. He's an average person, not a Moses. The great hall of fame of faith in Hebrews 11 names Moses and mentions the amazing ways that God used him. It also mentions the taking of the city of Jericho, but it never names Joshua. Yet we've seen in these studies that God used this average man phenomenally.

Verse 31 tells us that the lifestyle Joshua demonstrated, the leadership he exercised, and the message his life told, which was summarized in chapters 23 and 24, had a lasting impact on his generation and the generation that followed. I don't know about you, but that's what I care about more than anything in my friendships, my family, and my ministry. I want to have a sense that God is going to use what I say and how I live in a way that will have an effect long after I'm gone. Joshua's epitaph was not written on a marble gravestone. It was engraved on the hearts and lives of people who had trusted him and submitted themselves to his leadership.

In Mark Twain's autobiography he said, "Biographies are but the clothes and buttons of the man. The biography of the man himself cannot be written." The book of Joshua is not a biography of Joshua in the strictest sense, but it certainly tells us a great deal about this godly man. And like the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures, this book was written for several purposes. The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:11, "Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come." And in Romans 15:4 he wrote, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."

In this study we're going to review Joshua's life and ministry by going back through the book. It's been wonderful for me the last few weeks to read and reread the story once again. I want us to be encouraged and our hope to be strengthened as we review the life of this wonderful leader. I want us to learn from him, to know the Lord better, and to serve him more effectively. I am grateful for Warren Wiersbe's summary of Joshua's life in the conclusion of his commentary, *Be Strong - Putting God's Power To Work In Your Life*. Victor Books, 1983, Pp. 158-168.

We'll focus on four questions: (1) How did God prepare Joshua for his ministry? (2) What are some of the hallmarks of Joshua's leadership? (3) What was the essential message of Joshua's life and the book he wrote for us? (4) Most importantly, what have we learned about the Lord through Joshua's life and ministry to the nation Israel?

How God prepared Joshua

When God wants to accomplish something, he prepares a person for the task, and he prepares the task or place of service for the person. Jesus said this very clearly to James and John when they wanted him to appoint them to places of authority. He said, "...To sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared" (Mark 10:40).

The Lord invested at least seventeen years preparing the young Joseph for his work in Egypt. God spent eighty years preparing Moses for his forty-year ministry of delivering his people. David was promised the throne of the nation Israel, but it was years of trial and suffering and disappointment before David ever had the privilege of ruling over the united kingdom from the throne in Jerusalem.

Let's look at three tools God used, among others, to prepare Joshua for his ministry. The first one was suffering. Joshua was born into slavery in Egypt. He knew what it was to suffer. In Exodus 3:7 God said to Moses, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings...." Egypt was harsh and terrible, and yet it was part of God's preparation of Joshua for his calling.

It's God's pattern that suffering must come before glory. It was certainly true of the Lord Jesus. On the road to Emmaus with two of his disciples, after his resurrection, he asked the rhetorical question: "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:21.) The apostle Peter tells us that the Old Testament prophets inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and his subsequent glory (see 1 Peter 1:11). I believe it's true of us as well. Peter also wrote, "But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed...And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you." (1 Peter 4:13; 5:10.) Whatever our struggle, limitation, or loss, there is purpose in it. Suffering in the will of God has a purifying and maturing effect on our lives when we depend on his grace.

Sadly, in the church and in para-church ministries today, there are many leaders who proudly wear their medals, but who don't show many scars. The Lord Jesus bears the wounds of Calvary, and those wounds are now glorified in heaven, eternal reminders that suffering and glory go together in the purposes of God.

Now in itself, suffering isn't going to make anybody any better off. If that were true, the world would be a terrific place, because everybody suffers. But we all know people whom suffering has made resentful and bitter toward the Lord, and we have probably even had that experience ourselves.

But when suffering is mixed with the grace of God and with faith, it becomes a wonderful tool for building godly character. That was the confession of the apostle Paul when he was writing to the Corinthians about suffering in his own life: "...To keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me-to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me." (2 Corinthians 12:7-9.) When we accept our suffering as something that is under God's control and trust him to use it for his glory, then it's going to work for us to accomplish the will of God.

The second tool God used to prepare Joshua for ministry was submission to authority. Joshua learned to submit to the Lord by submitting to human authority. As the leader of the Jewish army in the wilderness under Moses, he followed Moses' orders and defeated the Amalekites (see Exodus 17). For many years (and through most of this book) he was known as the servant of Moses, staying with his master and serving him faithfully. God's pattern for leadership is summarized in the words of the Lord Jesus: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master." (Matthew 25:21.) That pattern still stands today.

Joshua was able to exercise leadership because he had learned to follow leadership. During the first half of his life he obeyed Moses, and during the second half he learned to listen directly to the Lord. In Joshua 1:7 God says in his call to him, "Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you; turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go." Later on in 11:15 it's recorded, "As the LORD had commanded Moses his servant, so Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did; he left nothing undone of all that the LORD had commanded Moses."

The third tool God used to prepare Joshua was delay. Hebrews 6:12 tells us that it is through faith and patience that we inherit what God has promised. If the people of Israel had listened to Joshua and Caleb, they would have entered their inheritance four decades sooner and would have been able to enjoy it that much longer. But Joshua and Caleb patiently endured the trials of the wilderness. Why? Because they believed the promises of God. They knew that one day they would claim their inheritance in the promised land. The apostle Paul spoke about the Thessalonian church in the same way. He remembered "...your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:3). The people of Israel, in their unbelief, rejected that "work of faith" of claiming the land the first time they came to Ka'desh-bar'nea. But their unwillingness to accept what God was giving and enter into the work of conquest didn't rob Joshua of his "steadfastness of hope."

We must learn to wait if we're going to be leaders. By nature I am a very impatient person. God's timing is always way behind mine. But God has put me in the wilderness many times and made me be quiet and wait on him. It's painful, but I'm glad that God is working on me that way.

In chapter 23 Joshua taught on leadership to the elders, the heads, the judges, the tribal leaders, and the officers of the nation. It is amazing to me that what Joshua summarized in that message, he had lived out for twenty-five years. His own character was demonstrated in the decisions he made and the attitude he manifested. Hebrews 13:7-8 says, "Remember your leaders [Joshua being one], who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." The God of faithfulness to Joshua is faithful to us. Joshua's life can be a tremendous

encouragement to us.

Hallmarks of Joshua's ministry

Let's turn to the second question in our study: What are some of the hallmarks of Joshua's leadership? First, he walked with God, as Moses, his mentor, did. The person the Holy Spirit selected to complete the book of Joshua was led to call him in verse 29 "the servant of the Lord." This is the only place in the book where he is given that title. It happened only after he died. No one can claim the title "the servant of the Lord" and then try to use it to rule people. It can only be granted in respectful memory.

In Joshua 1:8 God had said to him, "This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success." Joshua spent the rest of his life interacting with the Lord through the Scriptures and prayer. It started in chapter 5 before the battle of Jericho, when he was walking alone at night in front of the walls. He was confronted by the pre-incarnate Christ, and ended up flat on his face before the Lord. And throughout his ministry he was praying and meditating on the word. Again, after the failure at Ai, we saw him on his face crying out to the Lord in preparation for the second battle. Godly leadership is exercised by people of prayer and of the word, people who walk with the Lord.

A second hallmark of Joshua's leadership is courage. When God called Joshua to leadership in chapter 1, four different times he commanded Joshua to be courageous. Look at 1:9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." It takes courage to be a successful leader, to stand for what you believe and do what you know God wants you to do.

I thought of Martin Luther in this regard, standing alone before the leadership of the entire holy Roman empire. He said, "Here I stand, I can do no other." He based his life on the word of God and nothing else.

General Omar Bradley defined bravery this way: "the capacity to perform properly even when scared half to death." We know that Joshua was afraid before the final climactic battle at the waters of Merom against Jabin King of Hazor and the alliance of the northern cities, because God spoke to him before that battle and said, "Do not be afraid of them, for tomorrow at this time I will give over all of them, slain, to Israel" (11:6). I may be projecting onto Joshua my own fear before confrontation or some great responsibility, but I assume he was always afraid before battles. But the thing that stands out about Joshua is that he did his job; he won battle after battle.

Most of us aren't called to lead armies, but any kind of spiritual leadership involves risks and demands moral courage. Jesus said, "He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal" (John 12:25). If we're timid about life and about ministry, we'll never accomplish much for the Lord.

But Joshua's courage involved much more than just fighting the enemy, as great as that was. He had the courage to deal with sin in the camp of Israel after Achan had taken the banned things in chapter 7. He had the courage to challenge the tribes to quit procrastinating and claim their inheritance in chapter 17.

On the Saturday nights before I get up to preach the next morning, I don't sleep very well. I have a sense of apprehension. I'm not nervous about being in front of people, but I have a sense of responsibility to the word of the Lord. I often feel responsible to give a word that I'm not totally comfortable with, and I struggle with how it's going to be received. Sometimes it takes more courage to tell the truth among your own people than it takes to face the enemy on a battlefield.

A third hallmark of Joshua's leadership is that he followed God's plans. This conquest of the land was not some haphazard affair. It was carefully planned and executed. The first thing he did was capture the central hill country, dividing the land in half. That was followed by the southern campaign, and then finally the northern campaign. He would always conquer the cities first, and then mop up in the rural areas. Two different times he led his men in an all-night forced march to take the enemy by surprise. But at every step of

the way, we saw him checking in with the Lord, in prayer either with his military leaders or alone with the Lord, asking for guidance.

There were a couple of exceptions when Joshua didn't prayerfully listen to the plans of the Lord. He didn't pray before Ai, and he didn't pray before entering into the covenant with the people of Gibeon. Both times there was failure. But the good news is that he didn't quit. When he was defeated at Ai, Joshua admitted the failure, sought the face of the Lord, and went back and won the battle. And when he foolishly made the league with the Gibeonites, he admitted the mistake publicly, and then he made it work to the benefit of the nation and to God's glory. A successful leader isn't somebody who is always right, because no such person exists. A successful leader makes the best decisions they can and then keeps on going when they make mistakes. You learn from failure. Someone said that experience is a difficult teacher, because it always gives the exam first and then teaches the lesson afterward. But what we've seen in Joshua's life is that if by faith we turn to the Lord in our failures, he forgives us, renews us, and gives us the strength to try again. There is no real failure except to not try.

Fourth, Joshua enlisted others, and they trusted his spiritual authority. We know the names of only three soldiers in his army: Achan, who was a traitor; Caleb, who was Joshua's fellow spy and comrade-in-arms, a great man of faith; and Caleb's nephew Oth'ni-el. But Joshua couldn't have done the job without the thousands in his army. The conquest of Canaan wasn't the work of one man, it was the work of all who served faithfully, both in the battle and behind the lines.

True leaders don't demand respect, they command it. Look at 1:10-11: "Then Joshua commanded the officers of the people, "Pass through the camp, and command the people, 'Prepare your provisions; for within three days you are to pass over this Jordan, to go in to take possession of the land which the LORD your God gives you to possess.'" Throughout the history, his troops consistently responded to his orders. You can't help but conclude that he commanded their respect and loyalty. They knew that he was serving the Lord and serving them. His character was out in the open; they trusted his motives. His leadership and his life were godly, above reproach. As Moses' successor and as God's publicly appointed leader, there was authority placed on him, but it takes more than authority to lead people. Having a title and being over others organizationally do not guarantee that people will respond. It takes spiritual stature, having a servant's heart, and exercising consistent influence and decision-making for people to look up to you and listen to you.

In this day of media magic, a public relations firm can hype a nobody into an international celebrity. I just read an article about PR firms that are working exclusively with Christian leaders to make them more credible and appealing. But they can't give that celebrity the kind of stature that only comes from Christ-like sacrifice and faithful service. We don't need more celebrities in the Christian world, we need more servant leaders.

Real leaders don't use people to build their authority, they use their authority to build up people. There were many soldiers in Joshua's army who became heroes because Joshua was in command. A true leader leaves people behind him who may go far beyond him in influence and effect, and a real leader rejoices when he is outstripped, the way John the Baptist rejoiced that Christ would increase and he would decrease.

Fifth, Joshua was concerned about the future. Isaiah 39 talks about King Hezeki'ah, one of the good kings of the nation Israel. When Isaiah told him the kingdom of Judah would eventually go into captivity in Babylon, this was his response: "'The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good.' For he thought, 'There will be peace and security in my days.'" (39:8.) He was a good king, but it seems to me incredibly selfish not to be concerned about the following generations. Joshua's two farewell speeches in chapters 23 and 24 give ample evidence that he was burdened for the future of his people; he wanted to be sure that they knew the Lord and desired to serve him with their whole hearts. People who think only of what they can get today are opportunists, not true leaders. Spiritual leadership means planting the right seeds and then trusting God for the harvest in generations to come.

Finally, Joshua glorified God. We saw in our introductory message on Joshua's life that back in Numbers 11, he was very jealous for the honor and reputation of his master Moses. But he learned that the most important thing was the glory of the Lord. When the nation crossed the Jordan in Joshua 3, Joshua told the people, "Hereby you shall know that the living God is among you...." It was God who was to receive the glory. We

saw that consistently in Joshua's life. When the miracle march through the Jordan was over, Joshua put up a monument so that Israel and "all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty...." Lesser men put up monuments to themselves, which can be done in all kinds of subtle ways. Throughout the book of Joshua he repeatedly gave God the glory for everything that happened. It was the Lord who conquered the enemy, the Lord who gave the land to the people, the name of the Lord that was to be magnified in all the earth.

I heard a sports writer talk about George Seifert, the outgoing coach of the San Francisco Forty-Niners. He said that George Seifert took twice as much blame and half as much credit, and that's what made him a leader who was trusted. The same was certainly true of Joshua.

The essential message of Joshua

The third question in our study concerns the essential message of the book of Joshua. Practically, that message is that God keeps his promises and enables his servants to succeed if we will trust him and obey his word. God has a rich inheritance for his children here and now if they will claim it by faith. This message is amplified in the book of Hebrews, especially chapters 3-5.

We have seen that when it comes to the things of the Lord, there are several kinds of people in this world. Most people are still in bondage to their sins, living in Egypt, unregenerate, needing to be delivered by faith in Jesus Christ. Some have trusted Christ and have been delivered from bondage, but they're still wandering in the wilderness of unbelief because they won't enter into their inheritance by faith. Others have sampled the inheritance, like the two-and-a-half border tribes, but they end up being borderline believers, preferring to live there on the edge of the blessing. Finally, there are those who follow their "Joshua," that is, Jesus (the name is the same; it means "*Yahweh* is Salvation), and they enter the promised land, claiming their inheritance.

Remember that crossing the Jordan and entering the land is not a picture of dying and going to heaven. It's a picture of dying to the old life and entering into our spiritual inheritance here and now, enjoying the fullness of God's blessing as we serve the Lord and glorify him, living out the adventure and victory of faith. It's what Hebrews 5 calls entering into rest, which is not passivity. It's activity that is expressed out of the very life of Christ, not dependence on our own strength and resources.

Perhaps the greatest need in the church today is for us as God's people to see how much we're missing by wandering in unbelief, by living on the borderline of the blessing; and to then claim God's promise and enter fully into our spiritual inheritance. We're deprived because we have failed to claim our spiritual riches. These riches are detailed for us intensively in Ephesians 1-3. We're defeated people because we fail to trust our "Joshua" to lead us on to victory. Too many of us are like Achan, stealing from God. Or we're like the seven tribes, procrastinating and putting off moving into what God has for us. Or we're like Manasseh and Ephraim, complaining about the circumstances God has given us. But we could be like Caleb, a great example who claimed the most difficult area and overcame giants because he trusted God.

What we've learned about the Lord

That brings us to our last question: What have we learned about the Lord in the book of Joshua? The Lord, not Joshua, is the key person in this book. As we've studied it, we've discovered many wonderful things about God. First of all, he is a relational God. He is the God of his people Israel, the God of the covenant, who claimed them and knows them in intimate personal relationship.

He is the Lord of all the earth, Joshua said when they were crossing over the Jordan River (3:11). His special relationship with Israel had a purpose: He had a missionary heart for the world, and he wanted his people to represent him faithfully in evangelistic responsibility. Remember how fearful the Canaanite nations were when they heard that Israel's God was a God of salvation.

He is a God who keeps his promises. Every promise he made came true. At the close of his life Joshua was able to say to the people in 23:14, "...Not one thing has failed of all the good things which the LORD your God promised concerning you...."

We've seen that he is a holy God who will not tolerate sin. When Achan disobeyed the ban that God had put on Jericho, God withdrew his blessing. The army of Israel was defeated at Ai, and they couldn't expect victory until Joshua dealt with sin in the camp.

But we've also seen that he is a forgiving God who cleanses us when we confess our sins. And then he gives us the opportunity for victory.

He is a God who requires obedience. We've already talked about how Joshua consistently followed God's plan in the conquest. The word that came from the Lord was, "Therefore be very steadfast to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left...." (23:6). We've seen the obedience that Joshua modeled.

He is a God who never fails. We may fail him, but he will never fail us. Oswald J. Sanders wrote in his book *Robust in Faith*, "When God ordains our service, He is morally obligated to see us through."

Most importantly, he is a God of grace and mercy. That may be difficult to figure out when you think about that holy war against all the seemingly innocent Canaanites who were slaughtered. After church last Sunday a man approached me and said, "You were talking about me this morning. I'm on the fence, I have not made a decision." But what was troubling him was this issue of how a good God could slaughter all those people as part of the conquest. But the grace of God was there throughout. It was the grace of God that delayed his judgment for centuries before bringing Israel into the land. During that delay he sent Abraham into the land to be a missionary, to worship and to witness. Also, God was gracious in sending his reputation ahead of the people of Israel, provoking fear in the Canaanites. It was out of that fear that Rahab and her family and the entire city of Gibeon repented. And finally, it was the grace of God that wiped out this hopelessly degraded and polluted culture so that Jewish boys and girls could grow up in a land where God was worshiped and honored.

Years ago before I came to PBC, I went to the West Coast Young Presbyterian Pastors Conference at Mount Hermon. An Old Testament scholar from Princeton Seminary, Bernard Anderson, spoke, and one of his messages was from Joshua 3:5. Before they crossed the Jordan River Joshua said to the people, "Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you." I don't remember anything else about his message, but I remember the bottom line: Our tomorrows can be exciting beyond our wildest dreams if we're willing to "cross over" into a life of adventure and victory. He is still the God of wonders. We follow our "Joshua," Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is still calling ordinary men and women like us to be sanctified people who will trust him and obey him.

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